

44. A Duel of Eyes

She was slim and fair, with delicately curved lips, deep green eyes, and black hair that tumbled in rich curls down her back. She held herself regally, and it was clear that unlike me, she felt perfectly at home in a ball room. Her luxurious green and black ball gown, perfectly complementing her eyes and hair, fell down in elaborate folds over an elegantly sweeping crinoline. In short, she was very beautiful, and obviously knew just how to accentuate that beauty to attract a man's attention.

I hated her at first sight.

Well, what do you expect? I am a proud fighter for women's rights and independence. Of course I instantly despised somebody who conformed so absolutely to the female stereotype of the damsel in distress that I was trying to fight.

You despise her for being unfeminist, do you?

Yes, of course I did.

And the two-hundred and fifty other women in the room who are just the same kind of unfeminist wimps? You don't despise them, do you?

Well...

Might the fact that it is for her specifically that you feel an intense loathing have something to do with the fact that she is clinging to Mr Ambrose's arm like a limpet?

Sometimes, I really wished that inner voice of mine would shut up!

My eyes flicked from her to Mr Ambrose and back again. Could he... could they be...? No. They couldn't be, could they?

Mr Ambrose strode over to Lady Metcalf, who stood at the edge of the crowd, gaping at him in a rather unladylike manner. In this, I noticed, she was mimicked by almost every female in the room. Blast! Why did that annoy me so much?

He made a quick, curt bow.

"Please forgive this intrusion, My Lady. I changed my mind about not accepting your most recent invitation. I hope I'm not too late and the ball has already started?"

Since, from the floor full of frozen dances around him, it was quite blatantly obvious that the dance had indeed started, this remark was rather redundant. It was also as impolite as one could get. Colour rose to Lady Metcalf's cheeks. Her mouth closed. And opened, and closed again.

Was she thinking of letting her servants chase him out with hunting crops? That's what she would have done if I or anyone else had pulled off something like this. But Mr Rikkard Ambrose wasn't just anyone.

"N-no, of course not, Mr Ambrose."

My mouth dropped open. The voice coming out of Lady Metcalf's mouth wasn't the usual vulture's croak. It was so , uncertain, almost demure. Under Mr Ambrose cold gaze, she lowered her eyes.

Good God! Is she possessed or something?

"Of course we haven't started yet, Mr Ambrose. You've come just at the right time. May I introduce you to my family?"

"You may," Mr Ambrose granted with infinite generosity.

The raven-haired beauty stepped up beside him.

No... not raven-haired. Crow-haired! She's a crow! She's just the sort to pick at rotting carcasses. She's probably just waiting to sink her beak into Mr Ambrose.

She smiled. And it was an artificial smile that didn't reach her eyes. I knew it! I knew she couldn't be trusted. You could never trust females – they were so bloody conniving! Apart from unfortunate young secretaries and other kinds of feminists, of course.

She directed her smile at him, and he, although he didn't smile, nodded graciously. More graciously than he had ever nodded at me.

A thousand questions buzzed through my head. Who was she? Why was she here? Why had he brought her? Was she rich? Was he in love with her? Were they engaged? And most important of all, why the blazes were all of my questions about her?

I forced my eyes back to Mr Ambrose. It was him I should be concerned about.

Should be.

But wasn't.

I was concerned about her. Or, more specifically, her and him in combination.

My eyes snapped back to her. Heat welled up inside me. The heat of some dark unnamed emotion. Was it possible to want to claw a stranger's eyes out? Well, people said there was such a thing as love at first sight. Why not hate at first sight, then?

"Um, Miss Linton? My hand, if you please?"

Blinking in surprise, so suddenly ripped from my thoughts, I looked up at Lord Dalglish, then down at his hand, which I was clenching so tightly that it was white from lack of blood. I let go as if I had burned myself. "Oh, excuse me!"

"No matter," he said, took his other hand off my arm and stepped back from me. His attention seemed to be on something else. He was looking towards the two newcomers.

Well, if he wasn't interested in me any longer, all the better. Quickly, I stepped back and ducked into the crowd.

Just in time: Mr Ambrose had spotted Lord Dalglish.

There was a moment suspended in time. The two men's eyes met, and it was as if they were two lions meeting at a Sahara watering hole. They were the kings, the rest of us were just so many zebras and antelopes.

Mr Ambrose prowled forward. Lord Dalglish, ignoring Lady Metcalf, who was still trying to engage the newcomers' attention, shook out his mane of golden hair, and started to advance as well. People in their way stood aside hastily, as if they felt the tension in the air. I certainly did.

Finally, they stood facing each other. I watched from behind the shoulder of a bulky military gentleman who didn't realise he was being used as cover.

The two of them stared at one another, waiting for the other to bow first. A few seemingly endless seconds, they both inclined their heads about half an inch, at the same instance.

"Lord Dalglish," Mr Ambrose said.

"Lord Ambrose," Lord Dalglish said.

A shiver went down my back? Lord Ambrose? What the...!

"Mister Ambrose, your Lordship." Mr Ambrose's tone was arctic, but Lord Dalglish didn't flinch. He just smiled a friendly smile. A fake friendly smile. "Of course. My mistake."

There was a spell of silence so intense it pressed against my eardrums.

"It has been long," Mr Ambrose said.

"Yes, it has," Lord Dalglish said. "Quite some time, since last we met."

The air between them seemed to crackle. Lord Dalglish started to say something else, but I didn't catch it, because at that very moment, the evil crow descended on Mr Ambrose, grabbing his arm again.

"Come, my dear Rikkard," she said, with the broadest of smiles. "I wish to dance a reel or two."

Rikkard? Rikkard? She was allowed to call him by his first name? Who was this creature? The writer of the pink letters?

Well, if so, he seemed to pay a lot more attention to her in person than he did to her correspondence: with a last dark look at Lord Dalglish, he took her by the hand and led her onto the dance floor.

"What was that?" I heard some lady whisper beside me. "Between Mr Ambrose and His Lordship, I mean. I've seen a lot of important people taking the measure of each other, but that..."

"That was eerie," agreed another in whispered tones. I was inclined to agree.

Lord Dalglish still followed Mr Ambrose with his eyes. He had his back turned to me, so I couldn't see his expression. But I didn't really want to.

Then, suddenly, he turned, again with his charming smile on his face. "Miss Linton," he began. "I apologize for the interruption. Shall we finish our..."

His smile flickered and went out when he saw that I was no longer there beside him. I didn't wait to see what he would do next. By the time the music had started up again, I was already half across the room, trying to locate my little sister Ella.

I had to find Ella! It was essential that I found her again and helped her through the evening as well as I could. It was also essential that I occupied myself with something, anything which could keep my mind of the fact that Mr Rikkard Bloody Ambrose was dancing in this bloody ballroom probably only a few yards away from me with some bloody female I had never seen in my life!

I felt like hitting something. Preferably Mr Ambrose. Or her. Oh yes, he could snap at me and even continue to deny the fact that I was a girl, but present him with a girl with long lashes, a demure smile and a pretty dress, and he was suddenly dancing and going to balls and whatnot. Typical man!

Or is he? Whispered that tiny voice inside me. You heard Dalglish call him Lord. It's not every man who has a noble ancestry but chooses to deny the fact. Why do it?

No matter. Nobleman or common man, he was still a man! Self-centred, arrogant, infuriating!

I should just ignore his antics, the way I had learned to ignore most men's chauvinist behaviour over the years. But... But... there was this possessive way in which the black-haired girl had linked arms with him. For some reason I could not ignore that.

I spotted them in the distance, twirling over the dancefloor, and a stab of envy shot through me. No, I could not ignore that at all.

But why?

Fuming, I whirled around and led in search of Ella.

Bloody hell, why?

My Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

Recently, I've begun to receive an increasing number of messages from you, my dear readers, in regard to the updating status of this little story of mine, which lately has always been appearing as

"recently updated" in the Wattpad app, in spite of the fact that no new chapters have actually been published. As far as I know, this occurs because, it seems, a Wattpad story always appears as

"recently updated" inside the app every time an author makes any sort of small change to the text of the story (including such tiny things as fixing spelling mistakes, updating one's author's note, or any other kind of little alterations), no matter whether or not this actually affects the content, or a new chapter is

uploaded. I fear I cannot alter this technicality. ;)

Yours Truly,

Sir Rob

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